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By EARL WATT

- Daily Leader

Shelby Worthey's passion was caring for seniors.

The licensed practical nurse worked at Liberal's senior centers and in Southwest Medical Center's geriatrics unit, providing care and developing relationships with her patients and her co-workers.



That alone is not uncommon among passionate health care providers. But Shelby did it while battling rheumatoid arthritis in her lungs and tendons.

"I grew to love so many people," Shelby said of her time as a nurse. "There were so many people willing to share their knowledge with me and to help me."

While she hustled up and down the hallways breathing became more difficult.

"I was just so fatigued after an eight, 10 or 12 hour shift," she said. "Every muscle hurt. I just couldn't do it any more."

She was originally diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis when she was 27, but she continued to serve as a nurse for more than 20 years. The pain became too great, and in 2001, Shelby had to switch rolls from care giver to patient.

“I had to quit nursing far earlier than I wanted,” Shelby said.

As the disease continued to effect Shelby’s body, her Achilles tendons were split, and she had to learn to walk all over again.

Her treatments also intensified. She started taking remicade treatments five years ago.

But her attitude couldn’t have been better. Her trips to Southwest Medical Center for the three-hour intravenous procedure became known as “date night” for Shelby and her husband Don.

“We go and visit all our old friends,” Shelby said. “And my husband gets a guest tray form the cafeteria.”

Shelby’s not alone.

Other patients also receive similar treatments in an outpatient care center at Southwest Medical Center, something Shelby has seen grow over the years.

The medicine she receives is called remicade, and it is one of four available biological medicines that treat her condition. The procedure costs about \$4,000 every eight weeks.

And that’s just for 300 milligrams of the medication. Others receive higher doses, which comes at an additional cost.

Shelby depends on Medicare to cover the costs of the treatments, but there was still a gap.

But she qualified for a grant from the Health Well Foundation that picked up \$450 of the remaining bill, leaving her about \$40 out of pocket for items like IV bags, needles and other necessary expendables during the procedure.

If Southwest Medical Center didn't have the outpatient service, Shelby would have to go to Wichita to her rheumatologist for her treatments.

"Who wants to take a four-hour drive, when you don't feel well, or less than 10 minutes with the added benefit of seeing old friends?" Shelby said. "You tell me what would you choose? Of course I would be here. So many other people feel that way, too."

Southwest Medical Center has seen an increase in the use of its facilities with people like Shelby. As medical treatments continue to advance, more procedures are handled on an outpatient basis. In the past five years, outpatient services have increased by 40 percent at Southwest Medical Center.

Tuesday, voters will decide if the hospital will be able to expand with a focus on outpatient services, doctor recruitment and retention, and equipment upgrades that will allow more people to receive medical services in Liberal rather than traveling elsewhere. The proposed enhancements will allow the hospital to invest \$17 million in the facility with a commitment to pay the bonds with their revenues, keeping the expansion off the tax rolls.

"They have outgrown the holding area," Shelby said. "By the time they built the tower, the hospital census had already outgrown what was built there. We need more. I think this will be a great deal for everyone on an outpatient basis."

When Shelby does not receive her treatments, she experiences a crushing general fatigue, pain and aching in every muscle of her body, and she suffers from "brain fog," clouding her thought process.

With the treatments, Shelby can continue to live a very normal life.

“I hope that the hospital can eventually get a rheumatologist here,” she said. “By and large I am for whatever they need to do to keep this hospital No. 1 in this area.”

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